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Fear and voting: Evidence of a threat-opportunity model of citizenship acquisition among lower income immigrants of color beginning the naturalization process

Catherine Simpson Bueker[1]

Abstract

Citizenship acquisition is viewed as the key indicator of political incorporation into US society and one motivated by the desire to formally engage in the civic realm, but we know naturalization is undertaken for many reasons. What we know less about is what motivates particular groups. Through surveying 74 lower socio-economic immigrants of color initiating the naturalization process at free citizenship clinics in the Boston, Massachusetts area in the northeastern United States in fall 2019, we examine the stated motivations to naturalize. The survey data reveal that the desire to engage politically is the most commonly cited primary motivation to naturalize (44%), followed by a desire to feel safer in the US (29%). When looking at primary and secondary motivations, 66% cite the ability to vote, and 59% cite the desire to feel safer. The combined motivations of security and political engagement suggest a "threat-opportunity" model of citizenship acquisition, whereby immigrants assess the external socio-political threats and seek to neutralize them through both naturalizing and then engaging politically to change the environment. At the same time, statistically significant relationships between motivations and ethno-racial group and country of origin suggest additional factors must be examined.

Keywords: *naturalization; citizenship acquisition; political incorporation; defensive citizenship; civic engagement; threat-opportunity*

Introduction

Immigration has long been part of the American story, with legal provisions allowing for the foreign-born to become incorporated into its political fabric through the naturalization process. General requirements for citizenship acquisition include being at least 18 years old, living in the US as a Legal Permanent Resident for at least five years, passing both an English language and civics test, and being deemed a person of "good moral character" (USCIS 2020). Between 2005 and 2015, the rate of eligible immigrants who naturalized increased from 62% to 67%, with much larger increases from some countries of origin (Gonzalez-Barrera & Krogstad 2018) and as of 2017, approximately 21.8 million naturalized Americans were living across the US, with 8.4 million additional immigrants eligible to naturalize (Blizzard & Batalova 2019; Kerwin & Warren 2019). These figures, both the rates and raw numbers, suggest a trend towards political incorporation, but immigrants naturalize for myriad reasons, including access to government jobs, loans, and means-tested social welfare benefits, easier international travel, greater access to the country for relatives, and more legal protections vis-

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[1] Catherine Simpson Bueker, Chair, Department of Sociology; Professor of Sociology, Emmanuel College, Boston, Massachusetts, United States. E-mail: buekeca@emmanuel.edu.

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à-vis Legal Permanent Residents, including protection against deportation (Blizzard & Batalova 2019).

While significant attention has been paid to predictors of naturalizing in American society in recent decades (Bueker 2005; Van Hook, Brown & Bean 2006; Bloemraad 2006, 2013; Brettell 2006; Giberston 2004; Aptekar 2015, 2016; Plascencia 2012; Hou & Picot 2020), the existing literature continues to leave questions unanswered. Large-scale quantitative research leaves out the voices of immigrants and relies upon correlational analyses (Bueker 2005; Van Hook, Brown & Bean 2006); qualitative studies focus on a small number of immigrant groups (Gilbertson 2004; Plascencia 2012), making it difficult to identify trends across groups. Further, lower-income immigrants consistently naturalize at lower-rates than do higher-income immigrants, even while the former may have more to gain. Research has examined how policy initiatives that increase information and lower or remove fees increase naturalization applications (Hainmueller et al. 2018; Pastor 2019), but while these studies examine the impact of lowering barriers, they do not explore motivations. In the absence of a motivation to naturalize, lowered barriers may do little to increase rates.

This project examines motivations connected to citizenship acquisition among a sample of lower-income Latinx, Asian, and Black Boston-area immigrants who are initiating the process at free citizenship clinics during a period of heightened xenophobia, allowing us to move beyond current understandings of *which* groups naturalize to recognize *why* particular groups naturalize, an underexamined area of research. Further, by explicitly focusing on a sample of lower-income immigrants, we can examine whether there is credence to the rhetoric around lower-income immigrants naturalizing for more instrumental reasons, such as access to social welfare benefits or sponsoring relatives, as opposed to other factors. Finally, this study allows for an examination of fear as a motivator during a period of heightened xenophobia. This empirical analysis can also assist in the development of a theory of naturalization more relevant to this subset of the citizenship-eligible population.

Motivations Behind Citizenship Acquisition

Political access is often cited as the primary benefit of citizenship across many liberal democracies, based upon the classical Roman and Greek notions of what it means to be a citizen (Birkvad 2019; Erdal, Doeland & Tellander 2018). It theoretically allows for full membership in the polis by permitting individuals to vote, run for elected office, and donate money to campaigns. Aptekar (2015) finds that, *when prompted*, access to voting is the most commonly cited reason among newly naturalized citizens in the US. Plascencia's (2012) study of Mexican immigrants preparing for citizenship also finds the ability to vote is one of the main reasons cited to naturalize. One must remember the normative pressure to cite political engagement as a driving factor, however.

If citizenship as political membership exists on one end of the theoretical spectrum, on the other end is "strategic" citizenship, membership acquired to meet some particular, instrumental goal. Just as societies are strategic in their granting of citizenship, individuals also approach it in calculated ways. Individuals may seek to purchase citizenships, acquire dual nationalities when possible, and engage in "thin" supra-national forms of membership (Harpaz & Mateos 2019; Joppke 2018).

Strategic citizenship, as outlined by Joppke (2018) and others, is theorized in regards to the global elite, but should be applied more broadly. Holding a US or other highly valuable passport means traveling with greater ease and is a commonly cited motivation to naturalize (Aptekar 2015; Bauböck 2019; Brettell 2006; Gilberston 2004). Priority in sponsoring a relative to immigrate also appears as an incentive (Aptekar 2015; Brettell 2006; Plascencia 2012). Within the US, economic factors may motivate citizenship acquisition across the economic spectrum; citizens have greater access to federal loans and scholarships, certain government jobs, and some social welfare benefits (Nam & Kim 2012; Aptekar 2015, 2016). Further, naturalized citizens appear to gain a statistically significant bump in earnings from naturalizing (Sumption & Flamm 2012), with those who have acquired citizenship having higher levels of individual income than either the native-born or their eligible, but non-naturalized counterparts (Kerwin & Warren 2019).

While various political and economic benefits are often cited motivations to gain US citizenship, fear of deportation and anxiety from anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric may encourage immigrants to seek naturalization as a measure of security, engaging in a form of "defensive" citizenship (Aptekar 2015; Ong 2011). Naturalization as protection may become more pronounced during periods of high anti-immigrant sentiment (Ong 2011), and although there has not been widespread analysis of motivations in the Trump era, we see significant increases in applications during this time (Blizzard & Batalova 2019). Under a "defensive" scenario, individuals are not naturalizing to gain the benefits of citizenship, but are instead protecting against *not* being a citizen (Aptekar 2015; Logan, Oh & Darrah 2012; Ong 2011; Sumption & Flamm 2012). Other research has, however, found that such hostility can act as a barrier to political engagement as individuals fear engaging with formal governmental systems could put themselves or more precarious loved ones at risk (Alsan & Yang 2018; Molina & Yalcinkaya 2019; Portes & Rumbaut 1996; Tol 2012; Walker, Roman & Barreto 2019). Still other research finds that the combination of both threat and opportunity works to encourage some forms of political engagement among immigrants (Nichols 2017).

In addition to these concrete economic, political, and security benefits to citizenship, there are also psychic benefits. Citizenship conveys a sense of belonging, both from an internal and external perspective (Erdal, Doeland & Tellander 2018; Wood & Waite 2011; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, & Cassidy 2019; Molina & Yalcinkaya 2019; Aptekar 2015, 2016; Leitner & Ehrkamp 2006; Bloemraad 2013) and this sense of belonging may extend to the family unit (Anderson, Gibney, & Paoletti 2011; Leitner & Ehrkamp 2006). This may be particularly resonant for those whose race, religion, or language do not match the preconceived notions of what it means to be a part of the nation-state in which they are residing (Aptekar 2015; Birkvad 2019; Erdal, Doeland & Tellander 2018).

Local and National Contexts

Boston in the early 21st century exists as an immigrant friendly city within the context of a hostile national climate. Although Boston is a "sanctuary" city, where local law enforcement does not cooperate with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement, immigration policy largely exists at the federal level, which has hardened towards both documented and undocumented immigrants over the past 25 years. President Bill Clinton signed the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* (IIRIR) of 1996 which criminalized behaviors that had previously been civic offenses, making deportation easier, and limiting access to welfare benefits for non-citizens. Immigration policies continued to harden after 9/11. Under President Obama, immigrant deportations hit an all-time high, at over 400,000 in one year (Hauslohner 2019). Even with these precedents, the level of anti-immigrant rhetoric and practice towards both legal and undocumented immigration rose to new levels under the Trump administration.

Research Questions

Though prior quantitative studies have allowed us to identify what characteristics make one more or less likely to naturalize (Aguirre & Saenz 2002; Bueker 2005; Gonzalez-Barrera & Krogstad 2018, Portes & Rumbaut 1996), we have done little to quantify what immigrants self-report as their primary motivations to acquire US citizenship. Although a small sample, such as the one that is being utilized here, is limited in terms of generalizability, it does allow for the possibility of better understanding naturalization motivations among lower-income immigrants of color and refining theories of citizenship acquisition. Just as Leitner and Ehrkamp (2006) seek to talk *to* immigrants, rather than *about* them, this project explores the following questions through surveys with those beginning the naturalization process:

1. What do lower-income immigrants of color cite as their main motivations for naturalizing?
2. Is there variation in stated motivations by ethno-racial group, given the distinct process of racialization in the US and the role race and ethnicity play in the citizenship process?
3. Is there variation in stated motivations by country of origin, given that prior research identifies country of origin to be a predictor of naturalizing?

Methods

The data for this project come from a joint initiative between the author, as part of a community action research class, and a long-standing immigrant-serving organization in the Boston area. The organization runs monthly citizenship clinics in Boston and surrounding communities. The clinics are predominantly staffed by volunteers who are trained by full-time employees of the organization. Clinic participants learn of the clinics through other community organizations, by word of mouth, from flyers, and from radio and television advertisements. Immigrants register in advance, at which point they are screened for eligibility and told what forms to bring. During the approximately three-hour workshop, clients complete the extensive N-400 application for citizenship. According to the Director of the Citizenship Clinics, approximately 70% of clients are eligible for fee waivers.

The focus of the eleven-question survey—motivations and barriers related to naturalizing—was determined by the organization, but constructed by looking to prior research on citizenship acquisition in terms of both content and question wording. The survey began with basic demographic questions, including information on length of residency in the US and country of origin, before moving onto questions about motivations and barriers. Because of the normative pressure to state a desire for political engagement as the main motivation to naturalize, particularly at a citizenship clinic, we intentionally asked clients for both their primary and secondary motivations. This ideally encouraged greater honesty, perhaps more so in the second response.

The entire protocol was submitted to and approved by the author's College's Committee for the Protection of Human Participants in Research. Data were collected at all five citizenship clinics run by the organization between September and December 2019. These clinics took place both within Boston, as well as in smaller cities within an approximately 50-mile radius of the city.

A total of 74 surveys were collected. The overall unweighted response rate is 57.7%. Fifty of the surveys were completed in English and 24 were completed in Spanish. The data were inputted into SPSS and analyzed through bivariate analysis and Chi-square tests to test for statistical significance.

The survey data are highly representative of the overall population served by the clinics during fall 2019 and even during the preceding five years, when comparing the sample to the administrative data from 2014-2019. The survey data are also relatively representative of the larger immigrant population within the greater Boston area, with Haitian and Dominican immigrants among the most populous in the survey sample and in the population. The one significant variation between the survey data and the immigrant population is in regards to Chinese immigrants who are notably absent in the sample, but one of the largest immigrant groups in Boston.

The primary limitation of the data set is the relatively small sample size, making multivariate analysis unfeasible. A limitation of the data collection was the limited linguistic abilities of the researchers. The project would have benefitted greatly from Haitian Creole, Vietnamese and Cambodian data collectors and having the surveys and statements of informed consent translated into Haitian Creole, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, as well as having these forms in English and Spanish.

Findings

The Sample

The top countries of origin are listed in Table 1. The 74 participants come from 23 different countries, with Haiti and the Dominican Republic comprising approximately 1/3 of the sample. This is largely in keeping with general immigration trends to Boston. The relatively large presence of Southeast Asian immigrants, those from Cambodia and Vietnam, within the sample speak to the settlement patterns in the greater Boston area. The average age of clients at the fall 2019 clinics is 45. Participants have, on average, lived, in the US for 15.9 years, with a median length of residency of 12 years. Half of the sample had arrived in the US in the preceding decade, as of fall 2019, and another significant portion arrived more than 20 years earlier, suggesting a bimodal distribution in terms of residency.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Sample, N=74

Country of Origin	**Percent**	**Frequency**
Haiti	16.4	12
Dom. Republic	15.1	11
Cambodia	12.3	9
Colombia	6.8	5
Jamaica	6.8	5
Ecuador	5.5	4
Guatemala	4.1	3
Honduras	4.1	3

Vietnam	4.1	3
Other	24.7	14
Length of Time in U.S.		
<5 years	4.1	3
5-10 years	45.9	34
11-15 years	12.2	9
16-20 years	12.2	9
21+ years	25.7	19
	Mean	**Median**
Age at Entry	29.3	32.4
Age at Clinic	45.1	45.0
Time in U.S.	15.9	12.0

Motivations to Naturalize

The goal of this project is to better understand the motivations behind naturalizing among lower-income immigrants of color, during a period of strident anti-immigrant sentiment and policy. Figure 1 illustrates the range of reasons given, with two clearly dominating: a desire to participate politically (44.4%, n=32) and a desire to feel safer in the US (29.2%, n=21). Smaller numbers of participants chose the responses of "greater ease of travel," "encouraged by family or friends to naturalize," "access to federal jobs or loans," or for "another reason." No one cited a desire to sponsor a relative as the primary motivation. When asked if they had a second motivation, the trends remain consistent, with 27.8% (n=20) of the sample citing a desire to feel safer, and 23.6% (n=17) citing a desire to participate politically. The third most popular response to this question is "there is no second reason," suggesting that the primary motivations are likely quite honest and not the result of normative pressure to respond in a particular way. Participants also cite for their second reason, "greater ease of travel," "access to federal jobs and loans," "a desire to sponsor a relative," and "encouragement from family and friends."

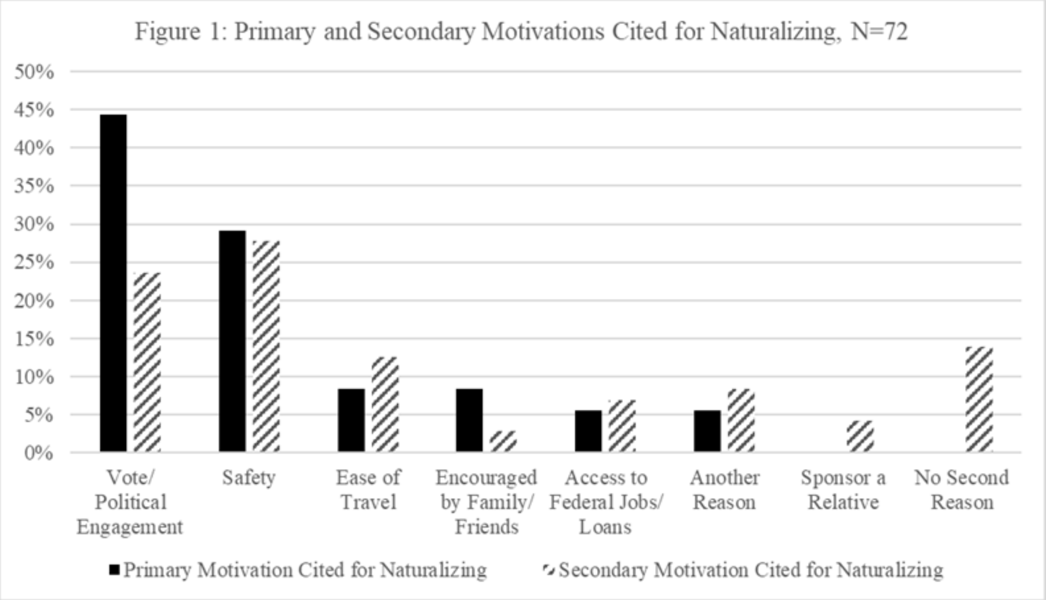
Figure 1: Primary and Secondary Motivations Cited for Naturalizing, N=72

In all, 68% (n=49) of participants cite a desire to become politically active as their primary or secondary reason and 57% (n=41) of participants cite a desire to feel safer as their primary or secondary reason to naturalize. Further, there appears to be a relationship between the two most popular responses of wanting to be more politically active and wanting to feel safer. More than 40% of individuals who responded that their main motivation to naturalize was to become more politically active chose, for their second reason, a desire to feel safer. Among those who cited a desire to feel safer as their main reason, 47.6% cited a desire to be more politically active as their second reason. This is the most common pair of responses and may be two sides of the same coin: being fearful in US society and desiring the ability to change that situation through formal political engagement, suggesting empirical support for the "threat opportunity" theory of civic activism (Nichols 2017).

Variations by Ethno-Racial Identity and Country of Origin

Table 2 illustrates the relationship between ethno-racial group and the likelihood of identifying political engagement or safety, respectively, as key motivations. Less than 50% of Asian immigrants chose political engagement as a key motivation as compared with 68% of Black immigrants and nearly 75% of Latinx immigrants. The lack of statistical significance is likely due to small sample size.

There is even greater variation when looking at the relationship between ethno-racial group and safety as a key motivation. Less than half (44%) of Black immigrants identify safety as a major motivation, compared with 58% of Latinx and 87% of Asian immigrants. The relationship between ethno-racial group and safety is statistically significant and suggests that motivations are mediated by additional factors.

Table 2. Stated Motivations to Naturalize by Ethno-Racial Group

Stated Motivations to Naturalize	**Asian, n=15**	**Latinx, n=32**	**Black, n=25**
Political Activity as Stated Primary or Secondary Motivation	46.7% (n=7)	73.5% (n=25)	68% (n=17)
Chi-Square	3.41		
Desire for Safety as Stated Primary or Secondary Motivation	86.7% (n=13)	58.1% (n=18)	44% (n=11)
Chi-Square	7.09*		

***P<.001; **P<.01; *P<.05; (a)<.1

There are some variations by country of origin, as can be seen in Table 3, which includes only those countries with at least five respondents.[2] Among the small sample of Colombian immigrants who are starting the naturalization process, 100% cite the desire to participate politically as a primary or secondary motivation, as do 83% of Haitian, 73% of Dominican, and 60% of Jamaican-origin-immigrants. In contrast, only 40% of Vietnamese and Cambodian-origin immigrants cite political engagement as a chief motivation. The relationship between country of origin and citing political engagement as a major incentive is marginally significant at the .1 level of significance.

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[2] Note that I have combined Vietnamese-origin and Cambodian-origin immigrants in an effort to analyze country of origin to the greatest extent possible within the context of a small sample. Although there are many differences between the two immigrant groups, they share 1) a common region of origin, 2) similar political systems, 3) similar means of access to the US via refugee status, and 4) similar racial identification in the US, making the grouping more theoretically sound than might be the case under other circumstances.

Table 3. Stated Motivations to Naturalize by Country of Origin

Stated Motivations to Naturalize	**Cambodia & Vietnam, N=12**	**Colombia, N=5**	**Dom.Rep., N=11**	**Haiti, N=12**	**Jamaica, N=5**
Political Activity as Primary or Secondary Motivation	41.7% (n=5)	100% (n=5)	72.7% (n=11)	83.3% (n=10)	60% (n=3)
Chi-Square	7.84 (a)				
Desire for Safety as Primary or Secondary Motivation	91.7% (n=11)	60% (n=3)	30% (n=3)	33.3% (n=4)	40% (n=2)
Chi-Square	11.6*				

***P<.001; **P<.01; *P<.05; (a)<.1

When examining the relationship between country of origin and safety as a major motivation to naturalize, 92% of Cambodian and Vietnamese, 60% of Colombian, 40% of Jamaican, 33% of Haitian, and 30% of Dominican-origin immigrants identify it as such. Whereas Cambodian and Vietnamese-origin immigrants seeking naturalization were significantly less likely than other country of origin groups to cite political access as a major motivating factor to naturalize, they are the most likely to cite safety as a key motivation. A chi-square test shows a statistically significant relationship between these variables. These country of origin variations likely explain the ethno-racial variation, as the "Asian" category is primarily comprised of individuals from Vietnam and Cambodia, with a small representation from China. These findings further Underscore the need to unpack the role of both country of origin and ethno-racial identity.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that people naturalize for a variety of reasons, in keeping with prior research (Aptekar 2015, 2016; Bloemraad 2006, 2013; Plascencia 2012; Brettell 2006). But, while prior research has found the value of a US passport (Aptekar 2015; Gilberston 2004; Brettell 2006; Bauböck 2019), the ability to sponsor relatives (Brettell 2006; Plascencia 2012; Aptekar 2015), and access to benefits (Gilbertson 2004) as key motivations, immigrants in this study are pursuing citizenship overwhelmingly for political voice and security. This frequently cited combination of factors suggests that at least for lower-income immigrants of color initiating naturalization during a heightened period of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies, a "threat-opportunity" theory of citizenship acquisition best explains what we are seeing.

These initial findings also suggest the need for a larger sample that would allow for more disaggregation by ethno-racial group and county of origin, given the early signs of variation that have emerged here. Although political participation and safety dominate as motivations across the sample, they are not uniform by ethno-racial group or country of origin. Among Vietnamese and Cambodian-origin immigrants, 92% cite safety as a key motivation for naturalizing, unsurprising given their refugee status. Seven of the twelve individuals from Cambodia and Vietnam have been in the US for more than 20 years, some arriving in the late 1970s, as the earliest waves of refugees. No other group has such a long tenure; they clearly feel that US citizenship is now necessary. This may result from the relatively recent changes in US policy, which permits the deportation of Cambodian refugees back to Cambodia. In keeping with this trend of citizenship for security, the one individual from Afghanistan and the two individuals from Sudan all cite security as their primary motivation to naturalize. Citizenship for security's sake is thus likely speaking to both fears related to policies in the US and in one's country of origin, thus making it necessary to examine a fuller range of factors in both the home and host societies that influence motivations to naturalize.

Conclusion

Strong anti-immigrant sentiment and policies disproportionately impact lower-income immigrants of color, even those who are documented. Those with fewer resources and those who are racialized as non-white (and therefore, non-American) encounter greater hostilities and hurdles in many facets of daily life. Ironically, this multi-layered bordering appears to encourage these same individuals to seek out citizenship for both protection and to become active members of the polis. Far from lower-income immigrants driven to naturalize for economic benefits or to sponsor relatives, these immigrants cite political engagement and civic protections as their major motivations. This is in contrast to findings about citizenship acquisition among the global elite whose goals suggest a form of "thin" membership (Bauböck 2019; Harpaz & Mateos 2019; Joppke 2018). The greater threat to our democratic system is not the incorporation of those who are demonized as "using" US citizenship, but the marginalization of those who could be the most active and engaged members in our civic sphere.

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